



# FISCAL NOTES

A Review of the Texas Economy from the Office of Susan Combs, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts

Texas Airports  
Keep Economy

*Soaring*



*General Aviation Supports Thousands of  
Texas Jobs*

By Michael Castellon

On a sweltering Saturday afternoon in June, four small aircraft are making methodical turns, descents and climbs over the city of Lockhart, just south of Austin. Each aircraft touches down briefly before powering into a takeoff at Lockhart Municipal Airport’s Runway 18.

Students perform these “touch-and-go” maneuvers on the 4,001-foot runway to learn basic procedure, hone their decision-making skills and refine their precision.

Today, several aircraft are tied down at Lockhart. Their pilots and passengers are visiting the town and surrounding area, and some are on a pilgrimage to one of the city’s famous barbecue joints (Lockhart’s official, and richly deserved, title is the Barbecue Capital of Texas).

The story is much the same at most small Texas airports on any given day. The state’s “general aviation” airports provide supplies and infrastructure for aircraft carrying casual flyers, cargo, business executives, oil workers, rescue personnel and vacationers.

Private pilots appreciate airfields such as Lockhart’s for their easy access and reasonable storage and fuel costs. Student aviators and instructors like small airports as they allow them to spend more time flying and less time queued up on taxiways behind airliners.

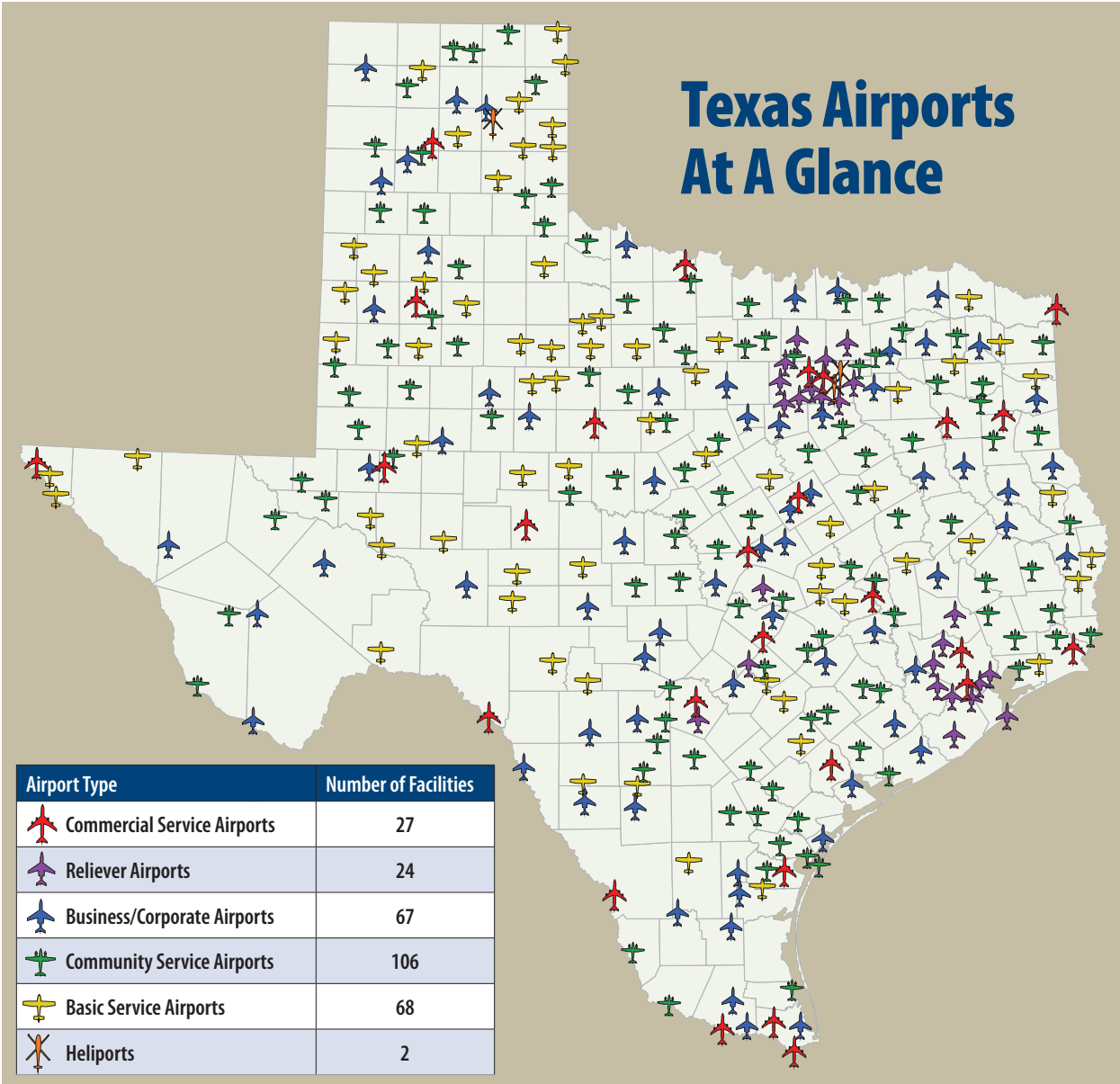
Aviation operations can be critical to local economies. General aviation activities and expenditures associated with Texas airports, business activities and visitor spending resulted in \$14.6 billion in economic activity in 2010 and supported more than 56,000 jobs paying more than \$3 billion in salaries and benefits, according to the Texas Department of Transportation.

In all, Texas has about 300 airports, including 25 commercial airports that emplaned almost 70 million passengers in 2010. The remainder represents a wide variety of general aviation airports of all sizes.

And user-friendly airports for general aviation are particularly welcome in Texas.

“The geographic dimensions of Texas dictate that many companies maintain aircraft to transport personnel and shipments to areas not serviced by commercial airlines,” says David Fulton, director of the Texas Department of Transportation’s Aviation Division. Air ambulances, agricultural pest operations, law enforcement, fire fighting and offshore oil operations all require dependable aviation infrastructure.

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Source: Texas Department of Transportation

“It’s hard to imagine companies like Valero and H-E-B conducting business without their aircraft fleet,” Fulton says.

### The Texas Aviation Infrastructure

It would be hard to find anymore who knows more — or who has done more for — Texas airports than Fulton.

Fulton is no stranger to airports or flying, having previously served as director of the Tennessee Department of Transportation’s Office of Aeronautics for 17 years. Before that, he flew the P3 Orion for the Navy, and served as a naval flight instructor in Corpus Christi.

Shortly after joining the Texas Department of Transportation in 1992, he hopped in a state car and toured the state’s airports. What he saw throughout the state’s airport infrastructure didn’t inspire him.

“Our statewide airport system was in extremely poor condition,” Fulton says. “It was apparent to me we had to rebuild most of the rural airports in Texas.”

Due to a lack of dedicated state funding for airport development, the burden of building and maintaining Texas’ general aviation airports historically had fallen to local governments. And while the state had some very dedicated people working for the Texas Aeronautics Commission, they had very little money to assist local communities in airport development. Most small towns simply could not devote the kind of money needed to build first-class airports.

When the Legislature created the Texas Department of Transportation in 1991, the agency began a major effort to rebuild the statewide airport system. At many airfields, weeds battled runway pavement. Hangars sat empty in ill repair. Public-use buildings, where available, were in very poor condition.

Fulton went to work by building a team (many of whom still work for him), and began administering facelifts for the state’s airfields.

“Over the past 20 years, we’ve been building a first-class airport facility for every community that needed one, one project at a time,” he says. “Sources of new grant funding were established. Our division has a small staff of 37 people, but we travel the state working directly with local governments on a very personal basis.

“Our primary goal, which has been accomplished, was to create a statewide system of airports that would accommodate



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Transportation

statewide air transportation needs and serve as a catalyst for economic development,” he says. “We provide the funding and manage the construction to ensure that every community has the type of airport needed to serve their short- and long-term air transportation needs.”

TxDOT administers Texas’ portion of the Federal Aviation Administration’s Airport Improvement Grant Program, which provides federal aid for airports under the State Block Grant Program. State funds further support airports through a TxDOT program.

TxDOT’s Texas Airport System Plan (TASP) identifies airports that play a key role in the state’s economic and social development, and guides federal and state funding to them to help local governments and communities help themselves through aviation. TASP airports have increased their economic activity in Texas by almost \$11 billion since 2005, according to a 2011 report.

In all, more than \$1 billion and a lot of effort have been invested in our statewide airport system, which is now considered one of the best in the nation.

**General Aviation Visitor Expenditures by Type of Spending, 2010 (in millions of dollars)**

Visitors to Texas general aviation airports spend money on a variety of products and services.

	<b>Lodging</b>	<b>\$69.5</b>
	<b>Food and Beverages</b>	<b>\$46.5</b>
	<b>Ground Transportation</b>	<b>\$16.3</b>
	<b>Retail and Entertainment</b>	<b>\$24.8</b>
	<b>Other</b>	<b>\$12.5</b>

Source: University of North Texas Center for Economic Development and Research & Texas Department of Transportation

**Expanding in Sugar Land**

In January 2012, Fulton and his team delivered a grant for about \$7 million for Sugar Land Regional Airport’s Taxiway Juliette project, a 10-acre expansion making room for seven additional corporate jet hangars. Officials expect fuel sales and leases resulting from the project to provide Sugar Land with about \$700,000 annually.

The project is only the most recent of more than \$40 million in upgrades TxDOT has funded at the airport during the last 26 years. Sugar Land Regional increasingly serves business jets that can be based there more efficiently and conveniently than at Houston’s two busy commercial service airports.

The efforts at Sugar Land have paid off. In 2010 and 2011, Aviation International News ranked Sugar Land Regional as the best airport for business aviation in North and South America.

“This really speaks volumes to the power of investment in airports, and how important aviation and aviation facilities are to our local and state economies,” Fulton says.

*See the full impact of aviation on the Texas economy by checking out TxDOT’s Economic Impact of Aviation report.*